



Lisa Mintz receives
Nature Inspiration Award

Description

Local activist awarded prize for spearheading conservation of falaise St-Jacques

By Patricia Dumais

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On November 24, 2021, the **Canadian Museum** announced the winners of its national **Nature Inspiration Awards for 2021**. These annual awards, now in their eighth year, recognize individuals, businesses and not-for-profits that show leadership, innovation and creative approaches to sustainability, connecting Canadians with nature and the natural world.



Lisa Mintz

The 2021 awards covered seven categories: Youth (aged 17 and younger), Adult, Not-for-Profit (small to medium), Not-for-Profit (large), Sustainable Business, Community Action and Lifetime Achievement. Videos about each of the 2021 recipients can be viewed at nature.ca/awards

Under the Adult category, the prize was awarded to local community organizer **Lisa Mintz** for advocacy in

spearheading conservation and protection of urban green spaces.

The librarian turned environmentalist founded the **Sauvons la falaise** initiative in 2015 to successfully save a 20-hectare wooded embankment in Montreal from being developed by a reconstruction project. Working tirelessly, she mobilized the community and, in 2020, the City of Montreal announced the area would be turned into parkland. Now leading several conservation groups, she inspires many through her educational outreach and community activism.

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WestmountMag submitted a series of questions to Lisa Mintz about her activism and award.

WM: *What prompted you to save the Falaise St-Jacques? Is it a place you knew from childhood or youth, or did you visit it later when bird watching?*

LM: I was actually raised in Toronto and moved to Montreal in 1998. (I love it here, by the way!) The story goes like this:

I was working for the Fraser Hickson Library when it moved to Madison and St-Jacques. At the time, I lived in Ville Saint-Pierre, one street below Montreal West, by Devil's Hill. I used to cycle or walk along St-Jacques to get home, and I was fascinated by the tops of trees I could see in the back of the buildings on the south side of the street.





Path in the falaise St-Jacques – Image: courtesy of Sauvons la falaise

One day in winter, after work, there were hundreds of crows (a murder) in the trees. I found a gate in the fence and started down the very steep hill to see what was there. (A *falaise* is an escarpment or steep slope). I didn't think I would be able to get back up the slope, and I was getting a little nervous as it was getting dark. Then I saw cross-country ski tracks at the bottom of the slope. I felt it would all be ok as obviously someone else had got in and out so I could just follow their trail in the snow.

'I used to cycle or walk along St-Jacques to get home, and I was fascinated by the tops of trees I could see in the back of the buildings on the south side of the street.'

It turned out that the tracks belonged to **Peter McQueen**, long-time City Councillor for NDG. He would become my first ally. I only learned what the place was called because, on the fence all along the top of it, in strategic places, are signs with a toll-free number to call if there are problems and to reference the falaise St-Jacques.

WM: *How long have you been working at saving the falaise?*

LM: The first meeting of the group was in October of 2015. I started Sauvons la falaise because, one day in March, I was walking along the bottom of the falaise on my way home, and there were a whole bunch of crows making a lot of noise. I was just below the U-Haul on St-Jacques street and went to investigate. I found that a surveyor had been there, marking off a huge area with orange markers.

I called **Deanne Delaney** of **Les Amis du Parc Meadowbrook**, which I had joined because, in their mission, is to join up with the falaise St-Jacques and they were the only group I could find that had any reference to the falaise. She told me to call Peter McQueen, who I had not yet met, and he told me to come to the **Turcot bon voisinage meeting** the next day. This was a meeting, held every three months, of the **Ministère des Transports du Québec (MTQ)**, **KPH Turcot**, city officials and community organizations, with an audience of citizens who can ask questions.

'I was driving past the falaise's western end and I was horrified! The entire area, 2 hectares of an ecoterritory, had been bulldozed. I got mad and started a group.'

I was not an environmentalist back then. I knew nothing about all of this, and if the meeting had not been the next day, I doubt I would have gone. I was very nervous when I asked my question. I had a picture of the orange markers and where they were. The lady from the MTQ told me that I need not worry, as those orange markers were for the construction workers regarding the endangered brown snake. There is an endangered brown snake on the falaise, and I was told that every time a worker saw one, he would put it behind the orange line so it would be safe. No trees would be cut. I wanted to believe this because then I wouldn't have to do anything about it.



Destruction in the falaise St-Jacques – Image: courtesy of Sauvons la falaise

In September, I was driving past the falaise's western end and I was horrified! The entire area, 2 hectares of an ecoterritory, had been bulldozed. I got mad and started a group.

WM: How did you convince people that it was worth saving? Can you name some people or groups that have been helpful?

Wow! That is a long question! I had a lot of help from a ton of people but especially **John Symon**, who wrote the first article about this destruction, and **Campbell Stuart**, ex-mayor of Montreal West and head of Les amis du parc Meadowbrook, who became my mentor. Another special mention is **Patrick Barnard**, who has documented the growth of Sauvons la falaise in his [Pimento Reports](#). **Sue Stacho**, who I watched create **Sauvons l'Anse à L'Orme** and copied what she did to create my own group. The **Green Coalition**, who showed up at my first manif, and **Alex Tyrell**, leader of the **Green Party of Quebec**, who gave us a place to meet and was the first politician I took for a walk in the falaise.

The **Conseil régional de l'environnement de Montréal (CRE)** got involved when the **Dalle-Parc** was brought up. No one knew what it was in 2015 except for CRE Montreal. The Dalle-Parc, a green cycling and pedestrian bridge in the original Turcot plans, was supposed to connect NDG to the Southwest over the highways and train tracks. It was also supposed to allow the free movement of animals and birds. It was the first thing cut when the Turcot project started being built, and all mention of it was also erased. Only the CRE had the memory and when Sauvons la falaise started working on getting the Dalle-Parc reinstated in the Turcot project, the CRE was there to help out.



Dalle-parc crossing highway 20, linking the falaise St-Jacques and a new park to the east – Image: Ministère des transports

They got 75 community organizations to sign an open letter calling for the reinstatement of the project, and acted as a bridge between the English and French community organizations, uniting the whole of Montreal in the call for the Dalle-Parc to be returned. Deanne Delaney had found a 2010 *Montreal Gazette* with the Dalle-Parc on the front page, so when the MTQ would say to me, “there never was such a thing as the Dalle-Parc,” I could show them the front page of the *Gazette*.

‘So, basically, everybody helped make this happen. Citizens, environmentalists, the Montreal government, provincial politicians, people of six boroughs... it has been amazing all the support given for this project.’

All the groups worked together and created the Dalle-Parc rassemblement in 2017. Hundreds of cyclists and politicians of all parties and levels of government were represented there and after that event, the MTQ would say to me, “there might have been a Dalle-Parc, but you will never get it.” In 2018, an announcement was made that the falaise St-Jacques would become the **7th grand parc in Montreal**, including the Dalle-Parc and an extra 30 hectares of reclaimed land on the Turcot yards.

So, basically, everybody helped make this happen. Citizens, environmentalists, the Montreal government, provincial politicians, people of six boroughs... it has been amazing all the support given for this project. Oh, and don't forget the press! I have done over 300 interviews in the past six years, most of them on this topic. Reporters made sure this issue was always at the forefront of people's minds.



Lisa Mintz being interviewed by Immam Kassam of CTV – Image: Lianne Barnes

WM: *Dealing with the MTQ, the city of Montreal, and politicians can be challenging at times – can you share how you stayed on track despite setbacks?*

LM: I didn't take no for an answer. I kept at everybody until it happened! I could not have done it without the Bon voisinage meetings, which became a forum for our activism. Reporters knew we would be there and came to interview us as we had the city and the ministry in the same room at the same time so they couldn't pass the buck, and we could meet with local politicians there as well.

'Other parts of the Parc de l'écoterritoire de la falaise lend themselves to human activity but the falaise itself is a rare gem of wild nature inside the city best left to the birds and the foxes and the deer.'

WM: *What are your fondest hopes for the Falaise?*

I would like to see the falaise itself be closed off to everything but environmental education and be used solely for that purpose. Other parts of the **Parc de l'écoterritoire de la falaise** lend themselves to human activity but the falaise itself is a rare gem of wild nature inside the city best left to the birds and the foxes and the deer.

WM: *And lastly, what do you plan to do with the prize money?*



LM: I plan to donate it to [UrbaNature Education](#), a not-for-profit to teach environmental education that I founded in 2017. We will use it to teach environmental education to people in the underserved communities surrounding the falaise, concentrating on NDG: St Raymond, Westhaven and Fielding Walkley. We look forward to introducing them to a large green space in their own backyard and the wonders it holds.

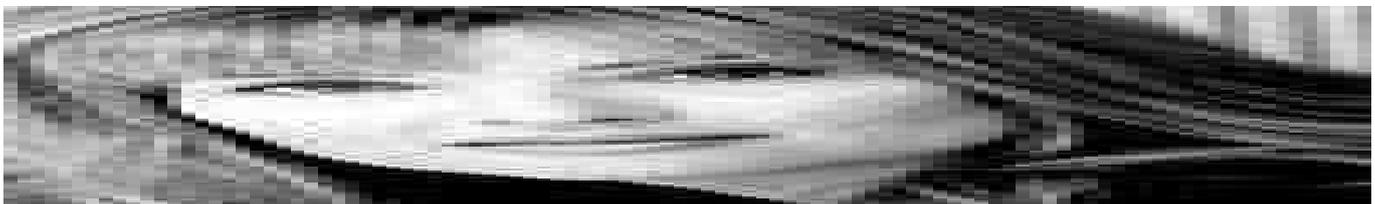
Feature image: Lisa Mintz (centre) meeting with 2021 municipal candidates by Lianne Barnes

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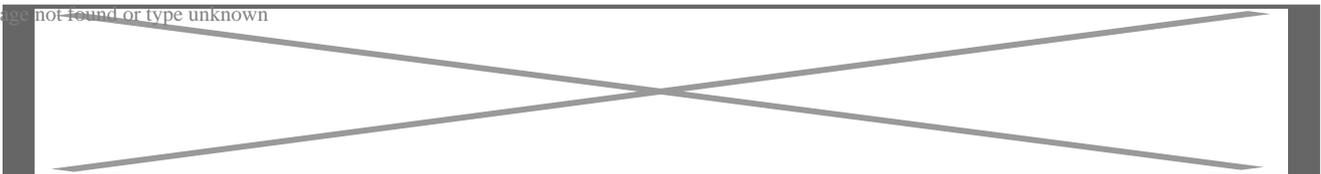
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